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## BIBLICAL TEACHING ON THE RIGHTEOUS ACQUISITION OF PROPERTY

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A statement of biblical teaching on any economic problem must assume two facts; first, biblical writers dealt with man as he is creatively constituted; second, the Old Testament purports to be a record of a revelation of God to a peculiar people, and the New, a record of God's revelation in Jesus of Nazareth. The teaching of either Testament on any other subject than the character of God and his demands on men lies outside its dominating purpose. These two presuppositions require fuller statement.

*Man's constitution.*—Man's organic life necessitates recurring wants and cravings, whose final end is the maintenance of individual life and health, and the continuance of the species. His mental life has inherent tendencies and desires whose final end is action for self-improvement. Both appetites and desires are acquisitive impulses. The tremendous forces of bodily craving and mental tendencies urge men to act for self-interest only. On the contrary, man is by constitution social. By contact with others affections are evoked, and the altruistic impulses recur as insistently as egoistic appetites and desires. They go out to other sensitive beings, and issue in benevolent or malevolent results for them. The final end of love, sympathy, gratitude, and generosity is the good of society; indirectly, the good of self. Thus, man finds that he is by creative design at once selfish and social, egoistic and altruistic. He cannot be one, and not the other. He must be both. He must acquire; he must permit others to acquire. It is to man endeavoring to interpret the tongues speaking confusedly within his constitution that the voice of prophet and apostle came, saying: "This is the way; walk thou in it."

*Character of the Old Testament material.*—Hebrew prophets and historians uniformly insisted that Jehovah had chosen Israel

for purely moral and religious ends (Gen. 18:19). Accordingly, Abraham is not portrayed as warrior, nor statesman, nor diplomat, nor jurist, nor financier, nor educator, nor philosopher, nor philanthropist, nor reformer; but as originator of historical monotheism—the father of the faithful. His descendants were not given Palestine as an end in itself, but as a place where religious and moral lessons could be learned through experiences gained amid actual historical processes. The purely ethical purpose of Jehovah is startlingly expressed by Amos: “You only have I known of all the families of the earth: therefore will I visit upon you all your iniquities” (3:2). Character, not land, was the prophet’s ideal.

Again, Jehovah’s choice of Israel necessitated the theocratic form of government. By deliverance from Egypt he became the nation’s King. The King aimed to disclose his unique character and his unique relations to his people. This was done by rigorously separating them from other peoples, by giving them laws and ordinances that served as wall of partition, and by assuming a position of seeming hostility to all nations not included in the covenant. The laws regulating conduct of members of the theocracy were at once religious, ethical, and civil. No distinction was made between sin, immorality, and crime. That is, the distinction between church and state, so characteristic of present mode of thought, was not conceived in Israel. A corollary of the peculiar relation of Jehovah to his people was that the statutes did not express the character of either the King or his subjects. They were too lax to represent the divine ideal, and too strict to reflect the actual historical condition of the governed. Legislation gave a standard to be reached, but it was also an accommodation to deeply rooted customs and institutions, in order to regulate, restrict, and ultimately abolish them.

With these presuppositions in mind, a fair degree of accuracy of interpretation may be expected.

*Old Testament legal literature.*—Hebrew legislation assumed that man’s constitutional appetites and desires normally and legitimately issued in possession of property; it assumed also that their satisfaction habitually culminated in infringement of rights of neighbors. It therefore aimed to check the force of acquisitive impulses by supplying and stimulating altruistic motives. It did this in

two directions; namely, love and gratitude toward God, sympathy and generosity toward men.

Godward affections. The religious obligations of the "Ten Words" are based on the fact and doctrine: "I am Jehovah thy God, who brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" (Exod. 20:2). By this act divine grace was revealed and thankful love incited; by this act, too, Jehovah became Israel's King. It was he who had given them houses, and lands, and cisterns, and vineyards, and orchards, for which they had not toiled (Deut. 6:10-15). Recipients of royal bounty were cautioned to beware of the temptation to attribute their wealth to their own power and ingenuity (Deut. 8:11 ff.). In order to make the caution effective, no Israelite was permitted to hold land, the chief form of capital in Palestine, in perpetuity (Lev. 25:23). He was simply tenant on the King's estate, and could not use his capital as if he had absolute right in it. He could not dispose of the land permanently (Lev. 25:14, 15). To prevent monopoly of land by a few families, redistribution was required every fifty years (Lev. 25:10 ff.). Again, no loyal subject approached the King empty-handed (Exod. 23:15; 34:20; Deut. 16:16). Offerings of tithes, of first-fruits, of first-born, of meal-sacrifices, and of burnt-sacrifices were taxes on tenants, and were conceived to be a rendering back to Jehovah of that which he had given. Corban, in all its forms, was the nation's recognition of its King's royal right to the best and to all.

Evidently, the conceived kingly relation of Jehovah to Israel, with implied obligations, tended to check abuse of the acquisitive powers of loyal subjects.

Manward affections. Long before Moses, society had required laws for protection of family, life, property, and reputation. Hence, though Hebrew legislation embodied ethical ideas already current, it also enacted laws that made more decidedly for development of sympathy and generosity. While in relation to fellow-men absolute right in property was recognized, and a property-owner's rights were protected against loss by theft (Exod. 22:1 ff.), by criminal negligence of neighbor (21:33 f.), by carelessness of neighbor (21:25; 22:6), by trespass (22:5), and by dishonesty or carelessness of either trustee (22:7 f.) or borrower (22:14); on the contrary,

laws requiring mildness toward slaves, charity for the poor and distressed, justice for strangers, kindness toward enemies, and consideration for animals show that duties rather than rights were the King's primary consideration. The command, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (Lev. 19:18), is but a restatement of the commands forbidding injury of fellow-man in person or property by act, word, or desire (Exod. 20:13-17).

How far removed Hebrew legislation was from the notions underlying modern legislation governing commercial enterprises may be sufficiently illustrated in the enactments concerning interest. Of the many forms of acquisition of property the one most common and most free from reproach is interest accruing from money loaned; yet Israelites were forbidden to exact it of their fellow-countrymen (Exod. 22:25; Lev. 25:37 f.; Deut. 23:19). This regulation assumed that the borrowing was not for speculative purposes, but made necessary by the poverty of the borrower. The lender was forbidden to take advantage of his neighbor's penury, and make gain of his distress. Analogous to this law was the one forbidding collection of just debts by severe measures, on the presumption that the debtor was honest, but in too straitened circumstances to pay legally contracted obligations (Deut. 24:10 f.). Such prohibitions did not apply in international business operations, however, on the presumption that in such circumstances money was borrowed and debts contracted for purposes of financial gain (Deut. 15:3; 23:20).

The study of the legal literature of the Old Testament reveals the facts, first, that the prescriptive enactments assume an economic condition and a relation of God to land and people not now existent; second, that the moral and religious motives prompting the specific enactments are still applicable to men bent on acquiring property. God is to be desired more than his gifts; fellow-men loved more than their property.

*Prophetic literature.*—The ideal characters of Hebrew historians were not praised for acquisitive powers, but for their altruistic impulses. Abraham, indeed, was rich, but not greedy for gain (Gen. 14:23, 24); Lot also was rich, but coveted more (Gen. 13:10 ff.). Esau is a perfect picture of one dominated by appetite;

Jacob's crippled thigh is a constant reminder of futility of acquisitive cunning in fulfilling Jehovah's purposes; Joseph's exaltation is for altruistic ends; and Achan's greed warned Israel that Palestine was not a field for plunder. The same ideals remained when Hebrew tribes were compacted into national unity, and when primitive simplicity of life gave way to luxury and despotism. True, historians dwell with delight on Solomon's administrative talents (1 Kings 3:9). They tell how he guarded the frontiers of his kingdom by building and garrisoning walled cities at strategic points; how he negotiated commercial treaties with Tyre, Sheba, and Egypt; how population increased and food-stuffs abounded; and how demands for agricultural and manufactured products multiplied until what had been luxuries became necessities. Yet, on the other hand, they also tell how building operations, extension of royal estates, and increase of the royal harem introduced pomp and luxury into the court; how imposition of heavy taxes reduced a large part of the population to practical serfdom; how the gulf between king and subject, rich and poor, became widened; how, in short, luxury, pride, poverty, and oppression were the price paid for material wealth. No wonder the breach between prophet and king occurred early in the history of the monarchy. The king embodied ideals congenial to those who laud acquisitive powers; the prophets instructed the people, king and subject, priest and layman, rich and poor, how to acquire righteousness of character, not how rightly to acquire property. David and Ahab, endowed with far more than ordinary acquisitive ability, are contemptible in their royal robbery of Uriah and Naboth; Nathan and Elijah were the historian's heroes. In Israel might did not make right.

That which is persistently suggested by the narrative writers is explicitly taught by the writing prophets. Amos beheld everywhere passion for gold and self-gratification. Nobles were indifferent to moral disorders; judges were venal; people were brutally licentious. Rich men had become so by violence (3:10), by dishonest trading (8:4-6), by oppressing debtors (2:6-8), and by perverting justice with bribes (5:11, 12). They indulged themselves in magnificent houses (3:15), luxurious ease, gluttonous eating, and frivolous mirth (6:4-6). Likewise, Hosea was broken-hearted at the

regnancy of appetite and passion. The population had become stupid by indulgence in drunkenness and fornication (4:11, 17, 18); the land was full of thieves, perjurers, adulterers, and murderers. Even priests delighted to see their fellows sin, that they might receive sin-offerings as means of feasting (4:8). Micah gives a fairly clear picture of how wealth was acquired in his day. Princes and judges are in league to oppress (7:3), and are heartless about the misery they cause (2:9; 3:2, 3). They grind the poor by excessive taxation (3:10). Priests and prophets officiate for money, and therefore teach pleasing things (3:5), caring nothing for justice. The strong villainously seize the possessions of the weak (2:1, 2). The prophet sees the ruler, the speculator, the promoter scheming in the silence of the night to overreach his neighbor, and curses the practical deification of might. "Woe to them that devise iniquity and work evil upon their beds; when the morning is light, they practice it, because it is in the power of their hand. They covet fields, and seize them; and houses, and take them away; and they oppress a man and his house, even a man and his heritage."

Ezekiel, too, speaks to his generation: "In thee have they taken bribes to shed blood; thou hast taken interest and increase, and thou hast greedily gained of thy neighbors by oppression" (22:12). He describes the ideally just Israelite as one who had not wronged his neighbor in that he has restored to the debtor his pledge, has taken nought by robbery, has not given forth on interest, nor taken any increase, has executed true justice between man and man (18:5-9). In brief, all the prophets from Amos to Malachi concern themselves with enunciating principles, and do not stoop to casuistry about legitimate methods of amassing wealth. They condemn avarice, the sinful greed for acquisition; they do not specify the amount of property a man should possess, nor define processes for obtaining it.

*Teaching of Jesus.*—Jesus comprehensively defined his mission in the words: "I must publish the good news of the kingdom of God" (Luke 4:43). In the course of his ministry he defined his work more minutely by stating what he came to do and what not to do. It was not his purpose to assume sovereignty over political

divisions of the world (Matt. 4:8-11), nor act as arbitrator in the distribution of property (Luke 12:14). He did come to seek the lost, to heal the morally sick, to invite sinners to repentance, and to give peace to burdened consciences by announcing forgiveness of sins. He pronounced blessed those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, not those who seek food and clothing. The object of human endeavor must be God's righteousness. To value anything less than God the supreme good is to miss eternal life (Matt. 19:6 ff.). To seek earthly treasure is to blunt the moral sense (6:19 ff.). If man should employ his acquisitive powers so successfully as to gain the world with its abounding material resources, he would gain nothing in comparison with what he himself might become in moral excellence. Gold and character are not interchangeable terms. Ethical values cannot be expressed in terms of commerce, except by analogy. Coins current in the world of business are of no avail in the kingdom of God (Luke 9:23-25). Jesus, therefore, demanded absolute self-surrender to himself as the mediator of the good he brought to men, even though the surrender involved a shameful death. Of course, all other sacrifices are included in this supreme attestation to the value of righteousness. Readiness to give riches to the poor (Mark 10:21), severance of home ties (Luke 14:26), mutilation of the body (Mark 9:43 f.), are to be expected of him who is willing to meet the death of the cross.

In view of Jesus' conception of his mission and of his estimate of the relative worthlessness of human possessions (Luke 12:15), it is almost grotesque to inquire: What did he teach about proper methods of acquisition of property? And when his words are examined, it is discovered that with purely economic questions he was not concerned. He said nothing about the existing institution of slavery, assuming that the slave had his duties as slave (Luke 17:7-10); he said nothing about forms of government, modes of taxation, equitable rates of interest, housing of the poor, rent, workingman's pay, production of capital, and exchange. Of taxation he said nothing, except when asked, and then assumed its legitimacy (Mark 12:14-17); of wages he simply said: "The workman is worthy of his wages" (Luke 10:7). How far Jesus



conceived his mission to be removed from the sphere of arbitration in isolated acts of life, and thus occasioning the rise of a body of prescriptive judgments which would issue in a religion of legalism, is illustrated in his treatment of the questions concerning payment of the half-shekel, the tribute to Cæsar, the woman taken in adultery, and the division of inherited property. In the last incident he instituted no inquiry into the equity of the brother's claim, but rebuked the sin that occasions all litigation in respect to property rights. Greedy desire to have more was equally the cause of the demand for division and of the refusal to divide. Hence, Christ entered upon no academic discussion of what appetites and desires normally demand; nor did he insist that normal demands are legitimately satisfied; nor did he casuistically set limits to acquisitive powers in particular cases. He demanded restraint upon desire. "Take heed, and beware of every form of acquisitiveness" (Luke 12:15). Then, in order to show that he had not in mind the mode of acquisition, but the fact of it, he told the story of the Rich Fool. The one condemned is not a money-lender, a banker, a tradesman, a monopolist, but a farmer. It is assumed that the farmer is honest, that he is not an oppressor of workmen. He is simply following the lead of nature, depending upon rain and sunshine for increase of grain and fruits. His gains are the results of God's beneficence to the agriculturist. Yet this man, who followed the least censurable of the many methods of securing increase, is termed a fool. For he looked upon everything acquired as his—*my* fruits, *my* barns, *my* grains, *my* goods. He has a grasping disposition; he is wholly self-centered. This temper of mind Jesus condemned. "And ye, seek not what to eat, and what to drink, and be not tossed about with cares." On the contrary: "Sell what ye have, and give alms; make for yourselves purses that grow not old, a treasure unfailing in the heavens, where no thief approaches, nor moth corrupts. For where your treasure is, there will your heart also be" (Luke 12:33, 34). That is, amid the clamorous claims of appetites and desires, cultivate the spirit of other-worldliness; seek supersensuous realities.

But Jesus was not an ascetic. The world was his Father's world. The earth, with its abounding resources of grains and fruits

and valuable minerals, and with the possibilities of increasing human comforts by handicrafts and commerce, was given to man to subdue and use. It is as wrong to despise wealth as to long for it; it is as wicked to condemn the rich for their riches as it is to condemn the poor for their poverty. Man *in* the world must do his work with powers and implements given him, but he must not be *of* the world. He is part of it, but above it. Jesus recognized this when he appealed to human desires for reward and position as motives for work in the kingdom of God. He assumed that there were inequalities of native endowments, and consequent inequalities in results of labor (Matt. 25:14 ff.); that with such inequalities man must employ his powers to the utmost of ability and with greatest fidelity, and expect commensurate advancement in social station (Luke 19:11 ff.); that a proprietor had the privilege of making his own terms with employees (Matt. 20:1 ff.); that, in relation to fellow-men, a proprietor had absolute right in the increase arising from the labor of men employed in his business (Matt. 21:33 ff.); and that every man, however limited his capability, must increase the capital, however small, intrusted to him (Matt. 25:26 ff.). In the complex relations of the industrial world, where the workman is worthy of his wages, whether employed in agriculture, manufacture, commerce, or in professional pursuits of law, medicine, or education, account must be taken of the willingness, the ingenuity, the ability, the output of the workman in estimating the amount of wages. It follows that incomes will vary. In the disposition to claim results for God-given acquisitive powers, two principles must govern conduct in the business world. First, "Be not insistent on rights" (Matt. 5:38 ff.); second, "Be generous in treatment of rivals" (Luke 6:34-36).

The one method of acquiring property that Jesus condemned was the one employed by grasping Pharisees, who used their piety as an instrument with which to win the confidence of those whom they wished to overreach (Mark 12:40). All other methods must be regulated by the comprehensive command: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind," and, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself."

*Apostolic teaching.*—The apostles grasped the meaning of Jesus'

mission, and found in it the blessing of giving, not of receiving. It is almost impertinent to look for instructions on proper ways of commercial gain to men who regulated their conduct in the spirit of the saying: "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:32-35). They constantly reaffirm their Master's assertion that covetousness is a vice so wholly inconsistent with the relation of a Christian to his Father, God (Heb. 13:5; Eph. 5:3), that it is termed idolatry (Eph. 5:5; Col. 3:5). They reaffirm the truth that, as against God, there is no absolute proprietorship in property. If he has placed property, whether much or little, in man's possession, it is a deed of trust, and the recipient is simply steward. The ability given to acquire it is from God; the employment of ability must be with view to God's approbation; the fruit of labor must be used for God's service. "Come now, ye that say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go into this city and spend one year there, and trade, and get gain;' instead of saying, 'If the Lord will, we shall both live, and do this or that'" (James 4:13 f.). "According as each received a gift, ministering it among yourselves, as good stewards of God's manifold grace" (1 Pet. 4:10).

As against fellow-men, the apostles recognized absolute right in property—even in forms of property that are now condemned. They accepted the social facts of their day; they assumed that a slave-owner had right to his slave's labor, and to deprive him of it was to injure him. So sensitive was Paul on this point that he was willing to pay the loss accruing to Philemon from the absence of the runaway Onesimus (Philemon, 18, 19). The apostle did not argue the owner's right, nor institute inquiry as to how the slave was acquired, whether through capture in battle, through slave-trading, or through birth in the owner's house. He was content to accept society as it was, and permit the principles of Christ's teaching to issue ultimately in the reconstruction of the social order.

In the course of their instruction in practical ethics, the apostles recognized certain necessities that must be met by the fruits of labor. They regarded non-producers of values, whether the idle rich or the idle poor, as a menace to society and unworthy to bear the Christian name. In consequence, they enjoined acquisition of property to the extent of satisfying the necessities of personal life (2 Thess.

3:10, 11), and of providing food and shelter for dependent ones in the home (1 Tim. 5:8). Not only self-respect, but also charity, was given as a motive for honest labor. "Let the stealer steal no more; but rather let him labor, working with his hands that which is good, that he may have to impart to him that has need" (Eph. 4:28). No limit is set to the amount acquired. Property in itself is not to be the object of endeavor. The man of God shuns the temptations and the snares, and foolish and hurtful desires, which come from desire for wealth, regarding the love of money the root of every form of evil; and if in God's providence he is rich, he deems his wealth a gift of God, a trust from God to be rightly enjoyed and rightly distributed (1 Tim. 6:9 ff.).

The cure for unrighteous acquisition is to cultivate the spirit of contentment (1 Tim. 6:6); to reflect upon the futility of riches in the crises of life (1 Tim. 6:17 f.); to look upon all men as brothers by creation (Acts 17:26), and brothers in the unity of one common need and one common mercy (Rom. 11:32); and to love fellow-men as Christ loved them (John 13:34; 15:12).